



YOUR LETTERS

MAILBOX

One of our more mature readers is offended by one of our more mature columnists, while half the population of the world may be insulted by what one un-PC PC company has published

★ Speeding fine, thanks to Shopper



After reading the 'Broadband rip-off' article (*News, Shopper*, October 2007), I decided to check the cable broadband speed of my internet service provider, Virgin Media. Various sites on the internet provided different results, and those with a product to sell reported the slowest speeds.

I took the final readings from <http://myspeed.visualware.com>, which recorded a download speed of 1.97Mbit/s and an upload speed of 187Kbit/s. I was astonished, as I am paying Virgin Media £25 a month for an advertised speed of up to 4Mbit/s. Virgin charges £18 a month for an advertised speed of 2Mbit/s, a difference of £7 a month for a service I appeared not to be getting.

After two hours on the phone to Virgin Media, I was finally rewarded with the paid-for upgraded service, with myspeed now reporting 3.89Mbit/s for downloading and 381Kbit/s for uploading. Virgin Media refunded the difference for the five months I had been getting the slower speed, which I will wait to confirm on my monthly invoice.

Your timely news article has not only saved me the cost of my annual subscription, but also ensured I am now getting what I pay for. Thank you, *Computer Shopper*!

Dave Griffiths

We're glad to have helped. It's always worth checking the speeds that your internet connection can manage

every so often. To get a realistic idea, time how long it takes to download a large file, although when you do your final calculation remember that MBs (megabytes) and Mbits (megabits) are different. To make things more complicated, a MB measurement is usually used for storage while a Mbit measurement is used when discussing data transfer over networks.

For example, a 1MB file on your disk is 1,024KB (kilobytes) in size, which translates to 1,048,576 bytes, or 8,388,608 bits. However, 1Mbit is the same as 1,000,000 bits. When transferred to your computer and stored on your disk, this would create a 0.12MB file.

To work out how fast your connection is when downloading a big file, start the download and note down the time it takes to transfer. When the download has finished, note down the file size. Windows will probably tell you this in bytes, so you will need to multiple this figure by eight to discover how many bits it is. Divide this by one million and divide the result by the time in seconds.

For example, let's say that we have downloaded a file of exactly 10MB in size (10,485,760 bytes) in 20 seconds. Multiple the bytes by eight to get 83,886,080 bits, and then divide this by one million to get 83.88Mbits. Divide this by 20 (in other words the time, in seconds) to discover that your internet connection was giving you a data transfer rate of 4.2Mbit/s. You will get the most accurate results by downloading large files.

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UPDATES UPDATE



When will Windows Vista's Service Pack 1 (SP1) come out? I have been desperate to upgrade to Vista but, when using the 30-day evaluation version, found it to be quite unstable and incompatible with several things, both hardware and software, including my modem and my ISP's software. There is therefore no chance that I will be able to get automatic updates.

I have been waiting for Microsoft to release SP1, which would hopefully cure most of my problems, but there is no sign of it yet. Is there a release date, and will it be shipped with the Vista disc? Or will we have to download or buy it?

Douglas Morton

There are a lot of rumours going around regarding Windows Vista's long-awaited Service Pack 1. The official word, which we've usually found to be the most accurate, is that the update will appear in the first part of 2008. We'd expect it to arrive around March. There is already a beta version available to testers.

As for how you will go about obtaining this update, we believe that it will be a free download, although you will need a broadband connection, as did anyone who

downloaded the full version of Windows XP's Service Pack 2. Currently the test version is weighing in at over 1GB, so it won't even fit on a CD, although a DVD may be available for those without fast internet connections.

SP1 should provide more hardware support, as well as fixing some performance issues, but anyone hoping that this it will provide lots of cool new features will probably be disappointed. Microsoft is emphasising that SP1 is intended to address feedback from users and will introduce proactively some extra security measures. Among the fixes expected, we can disclose that SP1 will include the following:

- Improved reliability and compatibility of Windows Vista when used with newer graphics cards
- Improved reliability of systems that were upgraded from Windows XP to Windows Vista
- Increased compatibility with many printer drivers
- Increased reliability and performance of Windows Vista when entering and resuming from sleep mode
- Improved speed for copying and extracting files
- In the future, flash memory storage and consumer devices will use the exFAT file system. Windows Vista SP1 will add support for this file system to the Vista operating system.



Installing this service pack could cause some users problems due to its size. Microsoft estimates that you will need 7GB of temporary disk space for systems using the 32-bit version of the operating system and as much as 12GB for 64-bit PCs. If you upgrade over the internet you will download only those files that your specific system needs, as was the case with the network install of Windows XP's SP2.

The so-called Express installation will involve downloading only around 50MB of files. If you have limited access to the internet connection you'll have to opt for the Stand-alone install. It is not yet clear if Microsoft will provide a DVD containing the full installation file.

ACTIVATION STATIONS



I read with interest your reviews of the hard disk backup software from Symantec and Acronis in *Shopper*, September 2007. Some time ago I upgraded from Windows XP to Windows Vista and, after a while, it became clear I was going to need a bigger hard disk.

I therefore bought a Hitachi 500GB SATA hard disk and a copy of Acronis TruImage. I installed the new hard disk as a secondary drive, prepared it using the Vista Disk Management tool and installed TruImage to make a copy of the original drive using the Clone Drive option.

Everything went well and, when I removed the old drive and rebooted the PC, Windows Vista loaded with no problems.

However, there was a little symbol in the bottom right of the screen. "You have three days to activate Vista." We know about Vista's copy protection and how changes in hardware can cause it to reactivate, but as far as I was concerned a problem such as this would occur only if I changed something significant such as the motherboard.

A quick online chat to Acronis established that if you change the hard disk on a Windows Vista PC, the operating system sees this as a major hardware change and deactivates your version of Vista. Luckily for me, being a genuine Vista user, I rang Microsoft, explained what had happened and was given a new activation code.

I think it's fair to point this out to those readers who may not be fully aware of this and are considering upgrading their PC. Manufacturers of software such as Acronis TruImage should also make it clear that, when cloning operating systems such as Vista, reactivation may be required.

Microsoft needs to sort this out and issue a statement on the reactivation policy. We all know people will upgrade their PCs from time to time, and if they have to reactivate every time it's going to get a little frustrating.

Kevin Smith

There are subtle differences to the way in which Windows Vista reacts to hardware upgrades depending on which version you have. The OEM version should handle new hard disks without any trouble, and appears to care only about the motherboard, while the retail version of Vista requires reactivation after "you replace a major hardware component in the computer", according to Microsoft. As an example, the

company says that upgrading a hard disk at the same time as changing the system RAM counts as a major hardware change.

You should not have to contact Microsoft directly to reactivate in these circumstances. Usually you just need to open Windows Activation by clicking the Start button, choosing Computer, Properties and then clicking 'Click here to activate Windows now'. You will need the administrator password, if you have set one up. If this fails you will need to call Microsoft.

For more information on Windows Vista's activation, check out <http://tinyurl.com/27ymj>.

RECYCLING HARD DISKS



Like many others I upgrade my hard disks from time to time, and the old ones have been sitting around in a cupboard. Quite recently I discovered that one can buy an external case for a 3½in hard disk on eBay for around £3.99 plus postage. This comes complete with a dual voltage power supply and a USB connector, which transforms the old hard disk into an external drive.

Suddenly, for a total outlay of around £30, I have three external drives, two of which have 120GB of storage while the other has 40GB. These can be used for extra storage and backup. I have never seen this mentioned in *Computer Shopper*, other than relating to a caddy for a laptop drive. The data transfer rate seems pretty good as well. Apart from the fact that the aluminium cases get a bit warm when in use, I have found no problems with this cheap solution for extra storage.

Alex Bennett

We have reviewed external hard disk enclosures for 3½in disks before, although not for a while. As luck would have it, however, we have reviewed two in this issue on page 49. These enclosures work with 3½in SATA disks and have the advantage of using eSATA connections as well as USB. eSATA is much faster than USB and provides results similar to having a disk installed internally.

There are plenty of IDE external hard disk enclosures on the market, although the cheapest are rarely as sturdy as the cases you get with a pre-built external disk. For use in a home office, these cheaper kits are fine and anyone who has



▲ An enclosure is a good way to reuse an old hard disk as external storage

installed an internal hard disk will have no problem assembling one of these.

LINUX EXPERT R.I.P.



I was saddened to see the demise of *Linux Expert*. For so many, Windows XP or Vista is regarded as an essential component of a computer. On the desktop, given the overwhelming dominance of Microsoft, this is not unreasonable. However, in the server and back-end space this is certainly not the case – yet.

As a freelance software developer I try to offer whatever skills I believe will be in demand. One of my customers hosts all their back-end systems using Linux. They bemoan the fact that, whereas Windows developers are commonplace, competent open-source developers are difficult to get hold of. In contrast, I know of at least one large IT department that has standardised on Visual Studio and the current accepted Microsoft operating system.

It is also notable that, according to Netcraft, if recent trends continue installations of Microsoft web server technology could eventually overtake that of open-source Apache's in the next couple of years. Many would no doubt relish the thought of a single environment for all clients and servers. Personally I believe this would be a bad thing.

It is true that the internet offers a wealth of open-source tutorials; however, individuals only look for these if they know of their existence and it's magazines in the mainstream such as *Computer Shopper* that provide the initial introduction.

Bob Hinton ☺

WRITE IN AND WIN!

Everyone runs out of disk space sooner or later. One way to solve the problem is to send us a great letter. That's because Western Digital has kindly agreed to furnish our Star Letter writers with a capacious 1TB My Book Pro external hard disk. This external drive connects using USB2 or FireWire. It supports both FireWire 400 and 800, and can transfer data twice as fast as some external disks we've tested. It can provide 1TB of storage, or 500GB using the safety-first mirrored mode. This sleek-looking unit comes complete with Retrospect backup software and even has an LED indicator on the front to display how much free disk space remains.



PLUS!

Every published letter-writer who provides their address also receives a *Computer Shopper* mug



**STAR PRIZE
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The sad truth is that, whenever we run a reader's survey, the parts of the magazine that deal with alternative operating systems are always the least popular. However, we are committed to covering subjects such as Linux so, although the *Linux Expert* column has gone, in some ways we believe we have embraced Linux more closely rather than started to ignore it.

Linux has become increasingly popular and is the closest it has ever been to a viable desktop operating system for normal people. This is why we have merged the *Advanced Windows* and *Linux Expert* articles. Because Linux is so mainstream you can expect project-related subjects that are not tied down to a specific operating system. If we discover that Linux is the best option for a particular project, we'll use it; likewise with Windows.

It will be interesting to compare a standard Linux distribution with Windows Home Server when it arrives. It could be that Linux provides a cheaper and easier way to create a home server – or maybe Windows Home Server will be so easy to use that we'll love it. Watch this space.

As far as programming goes, we will also be covering web development soon, including languages such as PHP and JavaScript.

MEL IS GOOD...



In a land of sheep, Mel Croucher is a shepherd. In *Rants & Raves* (*Shopper*, October 2007), he recounted how he measured the value received from all the monthly subscriptions he was signed up to and decided to cancel the lot. Monthly contracts for broadband, mobiles, cables, satellites and subscription websites are

frequently unnecessary, inefficient or unproductive.

Affordable, occasional one-off capital expenditures can be a good investment. But I have never signed up for a monthly subscription to anything. And I make only two annual subscriptions. One is for the government's broadcast tax, because the alternative is jail. The other is *Computer Shopper*, because the alternative is to miss its insightful columnists in a crazy world.

Stephen Wells

We are very grateful for your subscription, as was Mel for the positive feedback. However, sometimes those crazy columnists can get a little cranky and, when they do, they may cause offence...

...ZYGOTE IS BAD



I buy *Computer Shopper* regularly, in spite of the exorbitant price in Cyprus. I normally enjoy Zygot's comments, but I think he has just pressed my 'GO' button.

Maybe I misread or misunderstood his remarks in the September issue but, despite giving 70 a very hard nudge, I do not consider myself old and most certainly am not (too often) found as a gibbering wreck in a gutter. If he bothers to check his facts I think he will find that it is mainly the young lager lout that makes a habit of that. Am I wrong?



▲ Don't try this at home: Computer Shopper's butchered power supply lets us test each component's power usage

I once got referred to as "an old has-been" by a spotty-faced yob when I asked him politely to be quiet and stop swearing. As I pointed out, "better to be an old has-been than a never will be." The yob seemed to get quite irate until I stood up and he realised I was about a foot taller than him.

I like Zygot's idea, though. One day I may need an electronic wristband, but how many paramedics, or even doctors, have the ability to read the information using equipment supplied by the present NHS? I am one of the many deserters from the UK who live abroad, so there is absolutely no chance in my case. Getting an ambulance would be a wonder; a paramedic with it would be a miracle!

Sorry sir, but I found Zygot's remarks about diabetics and the old offensive. Neither

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The Editor is always pleased to receive ideas for articles, preferably sent first in outline form, with details of the author's background and, where available, samples of previously published work. We cannot, however, accept responsibility for unsolicited copy and it may take time for us to reply.

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of us can help our condition. One day he will be old. My family has a history of long life, so I hope I'm still around to gloat!

Frank

Zygote replies: Frankly, thank ye for reading Zygote and normally enjoying it. You may be a little older than the author, but not much. Don't let his rapier wit and devastating good looks fool you; he well remembers the 1940s.

As his piece was about technology helping senior citizens, there was no reference to lager louts or spotty yobs, and he notes with sympathy that they choose to visit places such as your island of Cyprus to congregate in great numbers. He affirms that in his corner of the English Riviera, it is people of his age and your age that commonly seek their lost marbles in the gutter.

MORE POWER TO YOU

 A thought for future reviews: retailers such as Tesco sell plugs that show how much energy an appliance is using. With the environment being such a major issue for everyone, I would like *Shopper* to include a power rating for the equipment being reviewed. This would include PCs, printers, scanners and so on.

Julian

That is a great idea. In fact, we have just developed a test that will allow us to test the power consumption of individual components such as hard disks, processors and so on. You can see our initial results in this month's *Computer Workshop* on page 156. We are going to give considerable thought to testing the power used

by PCs, printers and other complete systems in the near future.

SEXIST MONITOR

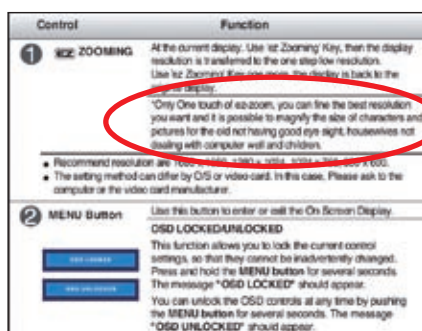


This quote is taken from the PDF manual for LG's 22in widescreen displays. It says: "Only One touch of ez-zoom, you can fine [sic] the best resolution you want and it is possible to magnify the size of characters and pictures for the old not having good eye sight, housewives not dealing with computer well and children."

If there was a legal fine for being politically incorrect LG would probably be in trouble. I laughed so hard I almost fell off my chair.

Peder Christensen

Have any other readers discovered offensive documentation? Please send your examples of prejudiced help files and manuals to letters@computershopper.co.uk. 



▲ It might be for a PC, but LG's manual for its 22in monitors isn't very PC

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